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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the problem of parent-attrition in center-based, home-based, and home-center-based programs for exceptional children. Attention is focused on the extent of the problem, associated factors, and previously employed strategies to minimize the parent attrition phenomenon. A table provides attrition data reported in the literature on parent involvement. (SBH)

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# Parent Attrition in Programs for Exceptional Children: Extent of the Problem, Associated Factors and Strategies for Minimizing the Phenomenon

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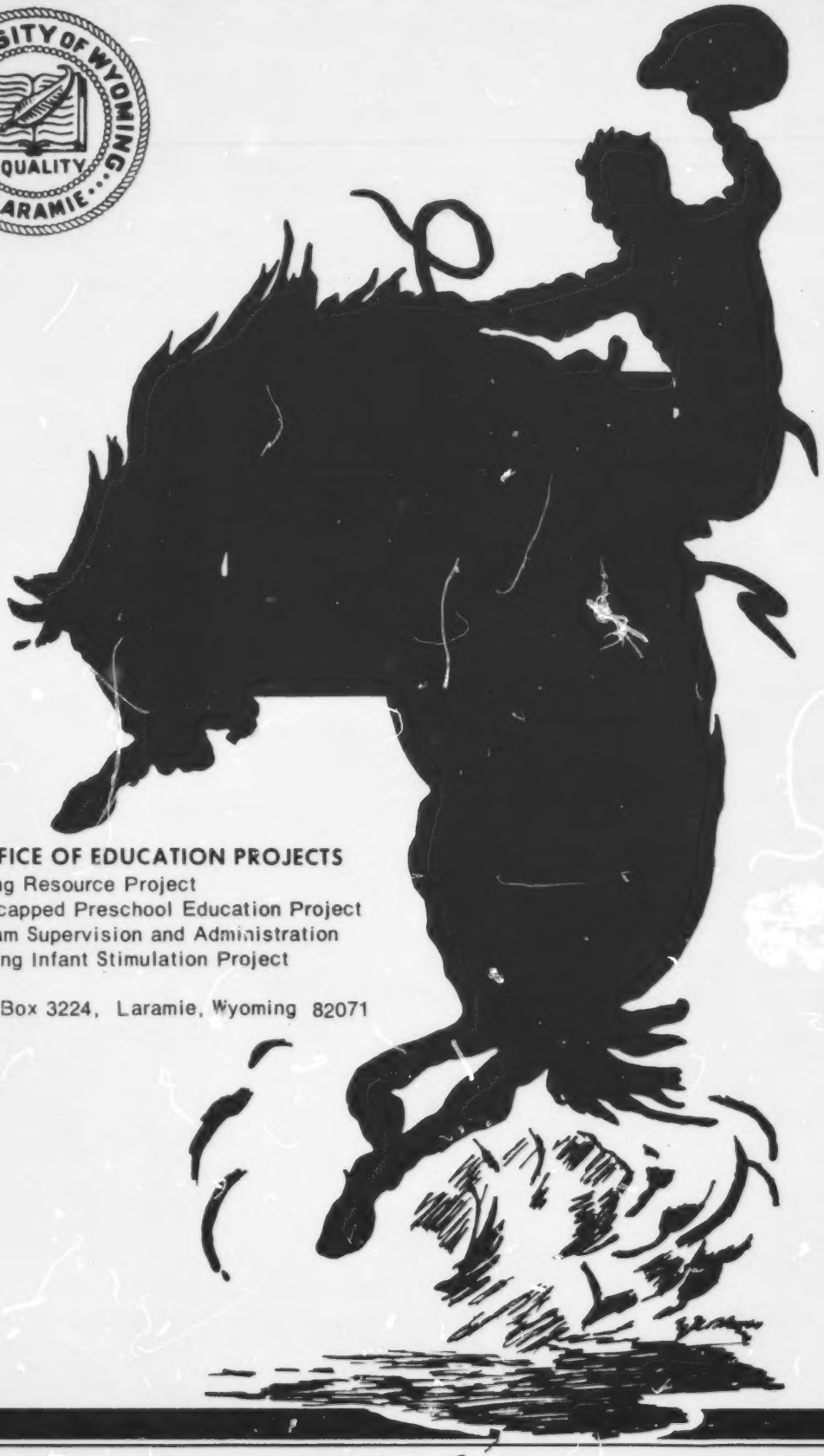

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Abstract

During the last decade, enthusiasm and support for parental involvement in center-based, home-based and home-center-based programs for exceptional children has grown among parents and professionals. Despite this interest, it appears that the extent of parent attrition has often been high in these programs. The threefold purpose of the present paper, therefore, was to describe (a) the extent of the problem, (b) associated factors and (c) previously employed strategies to minimize the parent attrition phenomenom.

# Parent Attrition in Programs for Exceptional Children: Extent of the Problem, Associated Factors and Strategies for Minimizing the Phenomenon

In recent years there has been a growing emphasis on parent participation in programs for exceptional children (Fredericks, Baldwin, & Grove, 1974; Hofmeister, & Reavis, 1974; Lillie, & Trohanis, 1976; Shearer, & Shearer, 1977; Quick, Little, & Campbell, 1973). As Osguthorpe and Harrison (1977) have observed, educators have never had such a captivated audience as they have in parents today. Parents "want to know what their children are learning, why certain instructional methods are being used and how they can help their children succeed" (p. 62). From the professional's point-of-view (Stile, 1976; 1978), parental participation has been rationalized and/or encouraged (a) due to the parent's strategic position, (b) as compensation for manpower shortages, (c) as a means to reduce instructional costs, and (d) as a means for solving the problems of time and distance associated with sparsely populated, rural areas.

Despite the above-described parental enthusiasm and encouragement on the part of educators, the extent of parent attrition (i.e., covert and/or overt non-participation) has been high in many programs and this

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phenomenon has rarely been reported in the literature (Thiagarajan, 1974).[2] Concerning home-based programs, Karnes and Teska (1975) have pointed out that, "the 15 mothers who completed any given program may have been 15 out of 20 or 15 out of 40 or 100" (p. 216).

While parent attrition itself is a cause for concern, it may precipitate and/or be associated with other problems. For example, attrition can (a)significantly reduce the impact of the total program, (b) revive feelings of resentment and anger in parents which are directed at the self and at the child and then translated into feelings of guilt (Schlesinger and Meadow, 1976), (c) discourage parents and educators from participation in future programs, and (d) introduce systematic biases which threaten the validity of experimental studies (Borg, & Gall, 1972).

This paper, therefore, has the following threefold purpose: (a) to identify the extent of the problem, (b) to identify associated factors, and (c) to present strategies for minimizing the parent attrition phenomenon.

## Extent of the Problem[3]

Attrition data for parent involvement programs have been made available in the literature on center-based programs by Anderson, Schlottman, and Weiner (1975), Della-Pianna (1966), Hofmeister and Latham (1972), Karnes, Teska, Hodgins and Badger (1970), Latham (1971), Latham and Hofmeister (1973), and Morrey (1970). Attrition data for home-based programs were reported by Anderson (1975), Shearer (1976),

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[2]Stile (1976; 1978) found only 17 reports of parent attrition in a review of 85 related sources. These data are contained in Table 1.

[3]Attrition data obtained in a more recent survey (Stile & Rimac, 1978) will be summarized at a later date.

Shearer and Shearer (1972), Stile (1976; 1978), and Wrightstone (1968). Concerning the Wrightstone report, while not a strict parent involvement program (telecommunications technology permitted school-to-home instruction for homebound children), analysis of the data revealed that parent factors accounted for much of the student attrition. Attrition data for home-center-based programs were provided by Fredericks, et al. (1971), Henderson and Garcia (1973), Karraker (1972), Niedermeyer (1969), Santostefano and Slayton (1967), and Wilkinson and Harrison (1973). Data for the programs cited in this section have been summarized below in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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## Factors Associated with Parent Attrition in Previous Programs

This section outlines factors which have been associated with parent attrition in ongoing training programs for exceptional children. It should be recognized that while duplication was not the intent of the authors, a particular factor may appear on more than one list.

While most objective data concerning factors associated with parent attrition have been uncovered in post-hoc analyses of what went wrong with particular programs, Anderson, et al. (1975) and Stile (1976; 1978) studied parent involvement programs on a longitudinal basis. In the Anderson study, a multivariate discriminant function analysis was used to explore 22 demographic and psychological variables which were thought to have some influence on participation/non-participation in a center-based training program for parents of institutionalized retarded

children. The analysis identified the following six factors as predictors of parent attrition:

1. *Presence of physical anomalies in the child.*
2. *High disparity in the child between chronological age and social maturity.*
3. *Distance from the institution.*
4. *Low occupational level of the father.*
5. *Maintenance payments not being required of the family.*
6. *Parent in custody of the child having been divorced and remarried.*

In the Stile study, a chi-square ($\underline{X}^2$) one-sample test with a Yates' correction for discontinuity was employed to explore the overall association among parent participation/non-participation and 45 demographic and process variables in a home-based program for severely and multiply handicapped children. Statistical significance was achieved or approached for the association among attrition and the following four variables:

1. *Frequency of teaching sessions.*
2. *Presence of the male parent in the home during his leisure hours.*
3. *Family mobility.*
4. *Family income.*

Leavitt and Cohen (1976) outlined the following six situations which have limited the extent of parent participation in programs for handicapped learners:

1. *Giving up autonomy in handling the child and adopting an interaction mode which is incompatible with the parent's natural style.*

2. *Evaluation of skill mastery by outside personnel.*
3. *Prescription of difficult intervention programs (especially with the severely handicapped).*
4. *Receiving outside personnel on a regular basis (especially in home-based programs).*
5. *Competition between parents and staff members (e.g., home teachers) for the child's attention.*
6. *Feelings of inadequacy evoked by the perceived expertise of staff members.*

In their experience with parents as home teachers of children with learning disabilities, Neifert and Gayton (1973) found the following four "high risk" family types:

1. *Type One. Those families in which the father does not give his active cooperation and support to the instructional efforts of the mother. As the authors observed, the father's ambivalent attitude may be interpreted by the child as a justification for taking the program lightly.*
2. *Type Two. Those families in which a number of negative interactions exist between parents and children. Thus, the program quickly reduces to a question of whether or not the child has to participate.*
3. *Type Three. A third type of high-risk family was termed the "multiple problem family." In these families, parents face such serious marital, financial and/or health problems that although the program may be attempted at first, the hierarchy of parental concerns may quickly change.*
4. *Type Four. The fourth high-risk family type was identified as*

*one with a large number of children. In addition to the increased time demands which are imposed by the larger family, there is a tendency to assign the teaching responsibility to siblings, and often there are shortages of suitable areas for instruction.*

Key and Cole (1977) and Cole (1978) found that the following seven factors were associated with parent attrition:

1. *Meetings held at inconvenient times and/or in inconvenient locations.*
2. *Parent input not encouraged (e.g., in program planning).*
3. *Unwarrented assumptions made regarding prerequisite skills of parents.*
4. *Continuous feedback/follow-up not provided for parents.*
5. *Parents threatened by professionals and/or by the situation(s).*
6. *Unrealistic expectations for outcomes of program(s).*
7. *Moving from the area.*

Davidson, O'Neill and Parks (1978) identified the following eight attrition-related factors:

1. *Parents "burned out" by previous efforts (e.g., helping other parents; campaigning for appropriate school programs, etc.).*
2. *Mother finds paid employment or other more challenging activities (as escape from an unsuccessful program; because child is making good progress).*
3. *Parents not wishing to be associated with parents of more severely handicapped children.*
4. *Programs not aimed at "social" needs of parents in addition to skill deficits of children.*

5. *Programs not aimed at age or ability levels of children (e.g., parents of three-year-old threatened by talk of group homes and/or sex education; parents of 17-year-old bored by presentations on toilet training, etc.).*
6. *Not allowing parents to organize and/or run their own programs.*
7. *Staffing programs with non-parent oriented professionals.*
8. *Feeling/attitude that programs for parents of exceptional children are incompatible with the current emphasis on "mainstreaming."*

Strategies for Minimizing Parent Attrition

The authors of the present paper are aware of only three attempts (Key & Cole, 1977; Stile, 1976; 1978; Stile & Rimac, 1978) to formally identify strategies for minimizing attrition from parent programs. Results from these three surveys are presented below:

The following seven strategies were identified in the Key and Cole study:

1. *Asking parents to administer programs whenever possible with professionals acting as consultants.*
2. *Assessing individual needs of parents.*
3. *Providing information to parents regarding planned outcomes (i.e., establishing a mechanism for ongoing program evaluation).*
4. *Conducting sessions in the parents' homes.*
5. *Providing flexible schedules.*
6. *Eliminating dominance by one or a small number of participants.*
7. *Including the whole family in programming efforts (i.e., not just the mother).*

Stile (1976; 1978) found that the following 12 inducements had been employed in deliberate attempts to minimize attrition from parent programs:

1. *Collecting refundable cash deposits.*
2. *Making continued programming for exceptional children contingent upon parent involvement.*
3. *Collecting fees.*
4. *Providing/requiring continuous school-to-home and home-to-school feedback.*
5. *Providing free babysitting, transportation and toys for children.*
6. *Supplanting technical terminology with nontechnical language.*
7. *Lowering the reading level in parent materials.*
8. *Involving the whole family.*
9. *Providing activities for children during parent training.*
10. *Recognizing parents as members of the teaching team.*
11. *Individualizing parent training.*
12. *Building specificity into instruction through use of packaged materials.*

In the most recent survey, Stile and Rimac (1978) asked Directors of First Chance projects to indicate whether their strategies were of the "pre-program," "program" or "post-program" (Fetsco, 1978) variety. The following 14 strategies were identified in that survey:

Pre-program strategies

1. *Providing program orientation (e.g., prospective parents are encouraged to visit ongoing programs prior to enrollment; talk to current enrollees, etc.).*

2. *Establishing parent-agency contractural agreements (e.g., parents are provided information relative to the extent of their participation; program involvement is made a condition of acceptance, etc.).*
3. *Assessing individual needs of children.*
4. *Assessing individual needs of parents.*

Program strategies

5. *Implementing individualized programs.*
6. *Providing daily home-carryover activities.*
7. *Requiring home-to-school feedback (e.g., charting behaviors).*
8. *Providing summer programs for siblings.*
9. *Providing frequent contact with the home (e.g., weekly phone calls; monthly conferences).*
10. *Providing transportation assistance.*
11. *Loaning toys and equipment.*

Post-program strategies

12. *Using program graduates as "faculty" members in subsequent programs.*
13. *Assuming responsibilities for follow-up services (e.g., maintaining contact with other agencies; assisting parents in evaluation of school facilities, programs, etc.).*
14. *Evaluation of program effectiveness for revision purposes.*

## Conclusion

Although rarely reported in the literature, there is evidence that the extent of parent attrition is often high in center-based, home-

based and home-center-based programs for exceptional children. Since parent attrition can be extremely detrimental to total programming efforts, it is hoped that the threefold purpose of the present paper is achieved and that efforts to minimize the parent attrition phenomenon receive an increased emphasis in future years.

Table 1

Attrition Data Reported in the Literature
on Parent Involvement

| Source | Name of Program/Agency | Area of Parent Involvement | Delivery System | Dependent Variable(s) | No. In Treatment Group(s) | Total Reported Attrition | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | No. | Percent |
| Anderson et al. (1975) | Hissom Memorial Center Sand Springs, OK. | Conferences relative to child's progress in institution | Center-based | Number of visits with institutionalized retarded children | 200 | 47 | (23.5%) |
| Della-Piana (1966) | University of Utah Reading Clinic, Salt Lake City, UT. | Training in behavior management methodology | " | Reading performance on California Reading Test (Form X) and Gilmore Oral Reading Test (Form A) | 20 | 7 | (35%) |
| Karnes et al. (1970) | Department of Special Education, University of Illinois Urbana, IL. | Training in infant stimulation techniques | " | Performance on Stanford-Binet and ITPA | 20 | 5 | (25%) |
| Latham (1971), Latham and Hofmeister (1972;1973) | Department of Special Education, Utah State University, Logan, UT. | Mediated training in use of task analysis, antecedent stimuli, reinforcement and record keeping | " | Abilities in eight self-help skill areas of the Student Progress Record | 20 | 10 | (50%) |

Table 1 (continued)

Attrition Data Reported in the Literature on Parent Involvement

| Source | Name of Program/Agency | Area of Parent Involvement | Delivery System | Dependent Variable(s) | No. In Treatment Group(s) | Total Reported Attrition | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | No. | Percent |
| Morrey (1970) | Department of Special Education, Utah State University, Logan, UT. | Training in specific intervention skills (PBM) | Center-based | Accelerated/Decelerated behaviors (individualized) | 20 | 14 | (70%) |
| Anderson (1975) | South Douglas County Early Childhood Education Project, South Umpqua School District, Myrtle Creek, OR. | Training in delivery of instruction (e.g., Distar language) and behavior management methodology (itinerant teacher) | Home-based | Performance on criterion-referenced test of program content | Yr. 1: 399<br>Yr. 2: 490<br>Yr. 3: 456 | Yr. 1: 42<br>Yr. 2: 122<br>Yr. 3: 91 | (11%)<br>(25%)<br>(20%) |
| Shearer (1976), Shearer & Shearer (1972) | Portage Project, Cooperative Educational Service Agency No. 12, Portage, WN. | Training in prescriptive teaching, reinforcement and record keeping (itinerant teacher) | " | Performance on Stanford-Binet, Cattell Infant Scale, Alpern-Boll Developmental Scale, and Gessell Developmental Schedule | 75 | 4 | (5%) |
| Stile (1976; 1978) | TELEPAC Project Exceptional Child Center, Utah State University, Logan, UT | Parent Delivery of academic and self-help areas | " | Performance in Academic and self-help areas of the Student-Progress Record and two project-developed ~~crition~~ Criterion - referenced tests | 64 | 19 | (30%) |

Table 1 (continued)

Attrition Data Reported in the Literature on Parent Involvement

| Source | Name of Program/Agency | Area of Parent Involvement | Delivery System | Dependent Variable(s) | No. In Treatment Group(s) | Total Reported Attrition | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | No. | Percent |
| Wrightstone et al. (1968) | Board of Education, City of New York, NY. | Cooperation relative to school-to-home telephone with radio broadcast classes and itinerant teacher for homebound student | Home-based | Performance on Metropolitan Reading Test, Wide Range Achievement Test, and Wechsler-Bellevue Scale | 42 | 12 | (29%) |
| Fredericks et al. (1971) | Teaching Research and Child Center Monmouth, OR. | Training in specific intervention skills | Home-center-based | Achievement of target response rate (individualized) | Not Available | Not Available | (15%) |
| Henderson and Garcia (1973) | Arizona Center for Early Childhood Education, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. | Training in behavior management methodology (i.e., modeling, cueing, and reinforcement) | " | Rate of question-asking behavior | 30 | 11 | (37%) |

Table 1 (continued)

Attrition Data Reported in the Literature on Parent Involvement

| Source | Name of Program/Agency | Area of Parent Involvement | Delivery System | Dependent Variable(s) | No. In Treatment Group(s) | Total Reported Attrition | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | No. | Percent |
| Karraker (1972) | University of Missouri, Kansas City, MI. | Training in behavior management methodology (i.e., the application of reinforcing contingencies for satisfactory grades on daily report cards) | Home-center-based | Performance on teacher-made tests of mathematics skill | 18 | 2 | (9%) |
| Niedermeyer (1969) | Parent Assisted Learning Program (PAL), Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Inglewood, CA. | Training in use of programmed reading materials | " | Performance on criterion-referenced test of PAL program content | 72 | 4 | (6%) |
| Santostefano and Stayton (1967) | Worcester Area Comprehensive Care Center for the Mentally Retarded, Clark University, Worcester, MA. | Techniques for teaching focal attention | " | Performance on criterion-referenced test of program content (e.g., sorting) | 31 | 3 | (10%) |

Table 1 (continued)

Attrition Data Reported in the Literature on Parent Involvement

| Source | Name of Program/Agency | Area of Parent Involvement | Delivery System | Dependent Variable(s) | No. In Treatment Group(s) | Total Reported Attrition | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | No. | Percent |
| Wilkinson & Harrison (1973) | Brigham Young University, Provo, UT. | Training in use of structured tutoring techniques for reading instruction | Home-center-based | Performance on criterion-referenced test of program content and the Spache Diagnostic Reading Scales Test | 33 | 3 | (9%) |

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Appendix A

Data Gathering Instrument

(Stile & Rimac, 1978)

PARENT ATTRITION QUESTIONNAIRE

Guidelines for Respondents (Please be aware of the following five guidelines before responding to any items on the questionnaire): (a) refer to the enclosed Definitions List in order to clear up troublesome terms, etc., (b) unless otherwise noted, all items refer to the preschool program/project identified on the envelope and/or cover letter, (c) all items assume the existence of a parent program as a component of the total program/project, (d) respond to all items possible, and (e) use the back of this sheet if necessary.

1.0 Is the total program/project still in existence?

☐ Yes . . . If yes, are you currently involved in the program? ___Yes ___No

☐ No

2.0 How would you classify the parent component of the program/project? Check one:

☐ "Center-based"

☐ "Home-based"

☐ "Home-center-based"

3.0 What was the duration of the most recently completed "cycle" of your parent program?

Duration:_____

4.0 How many parent-participants initiated the most recently completed cycle of your parent program? Number:_____

5.0 Of the number reported in item 4.0, how many parent-participants "overtly" or "covertly" withdrew before completion of the cycle? Number:_____

6.0 Had you considered "parent attrition" to be a problem prior to your participation in this study?

☐ Yes

☐ No

7.0 Indicate which (if any) of the following strategies were employed to minimize attrition in the most recently completed cycle of your parent program:

☐ "Pre-Program." Specify your pre-program strategy(ies):_____

☐ "Program." Specify your program strategy(ies):_____

☐ "Post-Program." Specify your post-program strategy(ies):_____

8.0 Indicate which (if any) strategy(ies) reported in 7.0 were employed but later discarded:

_____

_____

DEFINITIONS LIST

1. Center-based program: In a "center-based" parent program, parents and children are brought together in a central location (e.g., clinic, public school classroom, etc.) for training. Staff-parent interaction takes place almost entirely at the center.

2. Covert attrition: Termination/failure to participate in the program without notification/explanation given to project staff members (e.g., the parent simply does not use special programs, materials, etc.).

3. Cycle: A well-defined, reoccuring duration (e.g., six months, the Spring Semester, five days, etc.) of parent participation. This participation may be by a single parent, one group of parents, multiple groups, etc.[1]

4. Home-based program: A "home-based" program does not provide for grouping of children outside the home. It relies almost exclusively on educational intervention through the parents of the child, targets the parent-child relationship for change, and uses the home as the base for parent-child interaction.

5. Home-center-based model: A combination of the home-based and center-based models (i.e., parent-staff interactions take place in the center and in the home).

6. Overt attrition: Termination/failure to participate in the program with notification/explanation given to project staff members (e.g., "not enough time," "program is not meeting needs," etc.).

7. Parent attrition: Overt or covert non-participation of parents after initiation of a center-based, home-based, or home-center-based parent program.

8. Post-program strategy: Post-program strategies are those employed after the completion of a parent program. This category would include the placement of comments from satisfied graduates in the local media, the collection and use of feedback for program revision purposes, etc.[2]

9. Pre-program strategy: Pre-program strategies are those employed during the "intake stage." Examples of strategies used at this stage would include the collection of refundable deposits, orientation sessions, parent needs assessments, etc.[2]

10. Program strategy: Program strategies are those employed after the parent program has been implemented. For example, services such as baby-sitting and transportation are provided at no cost to participants.[2]

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[1] If your parent program has been continuous as opposed to cyclical and/or if you are presently involved in its first cycle, please cite/estimate the extent of parent attrition to this point.

[2] Fetsco, T. Personal communication, 1978.